

Tim Crouch's transferable skills: textual revision as distributed determination in *My Arm* and *The Author*

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Abstract

This paper offers a counterpoint to readings of Tim Crouch's plays which emphasise their indeterminacy, by paying closer attention to the controlled conditions that are needed in order to make such indeterminacy detectable in performance. Managing this balance – between shaping participating objects or people to the requirements of the performance, and letting participants be themselves – is shown to be the driving concern behind key alterations made to the opening of *My Arm* (2003) and the end of *The Author* (2009) during production, which I trace across differing versions of the published texts. I propose that the concept of skill, as recently elaborated by Richard Sennett and Tim Ingold, provides a useful conceptual framework for thinking through both sides of the balance at once: within and between each of these plays, Crouch attempts to move from Sennett's model, of locating skill within the sustained practice of individual subjects, to Ingold's, of seeing skill as the unfolding expression of an entire ecology. By making an association between skill and care, I argue that this shift is essential to Crouch's ethical and political commitment to distributing a sense of agency and collective responsibility among all those involved in a performance.

A theatre of determination

Early in the script for *My Arm*, Crouch's first play for adults, the performer is instructed to write "*laboriously on a placard:*

‘Art is anything you can get away with’” (*Plays* 36). Within *My Arm*’s diegesis, these words of Marshall McLuhan form the personal “rubric” of Simon Martin, a young artist “distinguished by a ruthless disregard for protocol” (*ibid*). Simon continues to get away with exploiting the protagonist, who has decided since childhood to keep his arm raised above his head, as the centrepiece of a series of increasingly lucrative exhibitions. Introducing the rubric through this performance gesture allows Crouch to express his own conflicted response to Simon’s aesthetics, with the adverb in the stage direction generating much of the conflict. To get away with something suggests not only to operate (just) outside the established codes of behaviour that constitute “protocol”, but also to do as little as possible altogether. Both of these qualities deny the potential association of art with *labour*, insofar as it requires effort and the execution of particular recognised techniques. The invitation for the audience to reconcile these two sets of conflicting values should already have been made implicitly by the performer, through the “measured [but] haphazard” way in which they are expected to manipulate the handheld objects, largely donated by the audience, that serve as the play’s props (*Plays* 24). Critics writing on Crouch’s plays have also needed to attend to this balance. Emilie Morin, who has investigated the debt that Crouch and some of his contemporaries owe to John Cage and Fluxus, argues that he “avowedly abides” by the quote from McLuhan, in his desire to introduce radical techniques from conceptual art into dramatic theatre (72-73). However, despite calling Fluxist interventions in galleries “pranks”, she is careful to acknowledge the serious, and (in Cage’s case) explicitly disciplined commitments which these artists held and the playwrights inherit: distinctions must be made between the unexpectedness and contingency of the artistic product suggested by ‘chance’, and the heightened con-

sciousness that indeterminacy requires from the artist, as they choose which approach to take in the moment (77-78). “Indeterminacy” is also a key term in Dan Rebellato’s argument for understanding all scripted drama as metaphorical, reliant upon “visually under-determined text” to generate “metaphors for an indeterminate fictional world” – but he too stresses that such worlds can be made well or badly, through generative or clichéd metaphors (25-26).

Both Morin and Rebellato place greater emphasis on the indeterminacy ultimately perceived by audiences and the progressive political consequences that it generates by opening space to imagine the world differently (Morin 75, Rebellato 27). Without negating their arguments, this paper offers a counterpoint by focusing instead on the controlled conditions out of which indeterminacy emerges within Crouch’s plays and which can themselves be perceived by audiences as well as the performers executing them. Crouch’s theatre might be understood as characterised by an ongoing and no less progressive process of *determination*. He has expressed admiration for Marcel Duchamp’s short piece “The Creative Act” (Morin 82), which defines art as “a series of efforts, pains, satisfaction, refusals, decisions” (118). By conspicuously staging the efforts and pains of writing in *My Arm*, Crouch acknowledges that art cannot be achieved without some engagement of technical proficiency: one cannot write that “art is anything you can get away with” without having learned to hold a pen, however much one attempts to disavow skill altogether. Elsewhere in the play, Crouch implies that acknowledging one’s reliance on skills is not merely an existential prerequisite for artists, but an ethical one. Simon and his associates’ rejection of manual dexterity is set in contrast with the art made by two characters: a portrait painter for whom

the protagonist sits, and, ultimately, the protagonist's brother Anthony, who abandons Simon to develop community art projects and then paint "small canvasses about his memories" (47). Both of these characters' acts of painting are associated with potential for moral transformation that the avant-garde artists lack: sitting for the portrait painter lets the protagonist feel "meaningful" (44); Anthony's return to painting seems to emerge from his activism, and secures his final reconciliation with his brother. Given that *My Arm* inherits the staging "vocabulary" of live art practices (Bottoms, "Authorising" 74), the challenge for the performer is to associate themselves with the painters' ethics, rather than the avant-garde artists' opportunism, by emphasising the skill and discipline with which this vocabulary is manipulated.

Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* is useful for developing a conception of technique that is expansive and ethically committed enough to meet *My Arm*'s demands. Sennett, who relates his approach to John Dewey's socialist principles (287), places emphasis on "material consciousness", his term for the growing awareness of the limitations and free opportunities granted to practitioners as they work (119). Practising a craft requires two corresponding judgements which must remain open for a practice not to become mechanical: working out the minimum force necessary to alter material, but also how much one need apply, when necessary, to alter it (167). (Sennett focuses on engagements with physical material, but his approach can be extrapolated to describe theatrical skills: worked-on material can include performers' bodies, the delivered text and the space in which they are performing.) Such openness is challenging, hazardous as well as "haphazard". Practitioners must ponder "ethical questions during the work process itself", and these can generate "bitterness and regret" (295-96).

How to maintain this balance – between determining the shape of material and allowing it to remain indeterminate – is the key question that Crouch asks of, and with, his collaborators. The most continuous of these have been Karl James and, since *An Oak Tree*, Andy Smith (known professionally and henceforth in this paper as ‘a smith’), who are credited as co-directors on the plays collected in *Plays: One*, but they include many others who have varied from play to play and performance to performance. In a characteristic list by smith, these include “performers, technicians, front-of-house staff, audience” (411). In writing about contemporary British plays, the task of reining in and allowing for indeterminacies is often associated primarily with the writer: for example, Morin notes Sarah Kane’s preference for leaving certain aspects of *Crave*’s performance ‘unscripted’ or ‘partially indeterminate’ to allow for ‘directorial choices’, which is then extended in *4.48 Psychosis* (74). While Crouch’s plays emerge at least partly from periods of writing and thinking alone before rehearsal (smith 413; Radosavljević 217; Ilter 402), his sustained commitment to collaboration and his preference for describing himself as a theatre-maker rather than a playwright means that this association is too neat in his case. This paper seeks to resist it by attending to the revisions made to scripts before and during production. According to “The Creative Act”, art succeeds insofar as the artist’s pains and efforts fail to achieve desired results (118-19). Acts of writing are not the basic prophylactic against failure to stabilise the boundary between determinacy and indeterminacy, but part and parcel of a system in which all creative acts continue to fail again and fail better.

My Arm: introducing a model

This is the opening display of objects as recorded in the most

recently published script of *My Arm*:

This is the house we lived in.

The performer presents to the camera one of the objects from the audience.

This is my dad's car.

The performer presents a photo or an object.

This is my mum's car.

The performer presents a photo or an object.

This is our dog.

The performer presents a photo or an object.

(Plays 25-26)

Stephen Bottoms's summary of Crouch's theatre as a "provocative juxtaposition of real-world materials with language that facilitates alternative perceptions in spectators' minds" is useful here ("Authorising" 75). It allows the moment to be figured as a pair of skilled practices, each with a distinct set of agents, tools and materials. The performer uses pre-prepared language to manipulate unexpected real-world materials and, by proxy, the mental perceptions of the audience; the audience apply their habits of mental engagement to the "provocative juxtaposition" before them. Although Crouch insists that the audience "will make the transformation in me, not me" (qtd in Bottoms, "Authorising" 73), the practices are mutually dependent, each compensating for what the other cannot determine: a performer makes a repeatable gesture before an audience, who share an established set of terms on which to respond.

My Arm's initial script, printed before its first public

previews at Battersea Arts Centre in London, does not establish the fixed pattern of this final version. Instead of objects which are “in no way representational” (*My Arm* 13), the dog is represented by “a photo of a dog” and “the house we lived in” by “a rough picture of a house [drawn] on a notepad” (15). The closer that one examines the relationship between narration and props, the more it becomes apparent that this original opening is more characteristic of *My Arm*’s texture as a whole than the revised one. Contrary to the opening stage direction, and even allowing the “doll that represents the performer” to stand as an exception that proves the rule (*Plays* 24), there are several moments in which objects’ capacity to become “representational” does not lie merely with the audience, because support is provided by the object’s visual and material properties. Rebellato notes that Crouch’s conception of stage-worlds as metaphors is “relaxed enough” to incorporate metonym and simile, with some of metaphor’s functions being executed through appeals to what an onstage object resembles or actually is (26-27). The performer’s revelation of a lit sparkler here, for example, can function as a metonym for a firework display (*Plays* 29). Introducing a real peanut and bird’s nest to illustrate the protagonist’s description of “the thickest pubic hair and smallest penis [he had] ever seen on a boy of 14” is, on one level, a joke which ruptures the audience’s now-established assumptions (35). But, after the surprise passes, one recognises that what is being shown is *itself* the referent of a simile. The overriding task of creating new perceptions without full visual stimulus continues, but through a wider variety of means. Words carry their own self-contained potential for startling transformation, as is also demonstrated by the subsequent unillustrated simile about “crying like a newborn lamb looking for its mother in the rain” (41). Rebellato

proposes that theatrical naturalism has become “a kind of dead metaphor”, over-reliant on conventions of what looks ‘literal’ or ‘realistic’, but neither he nor Crouch proposes rejecting the prosthetics of metonym and simile as much as maintaining “fuzzy distinctions” between them (26-27).

Instead of seeing the performance as composed of distinct categories like ‘real-world materials’ and ‘language’, operated on by distinct agents like ‘audiences’ and ‘the performer’, these elements might form a single, ‘fuzzy’ performance process in which forms of determination can nevertheless still be traced. A more integrated model of being absorbed in material is needed than Sennett’s, placing less privilege on the crafts-*man* as governing agent. The anthropologist Tim Ingold notably defines “skill” not in terms of “an agent with certain purposes or designs” employing “an instrument with certain functions”, but as “the primary condition of involvement of the craftsman [...] in an environment” or “taskscape” (352). On such terms, the performance would be a matter neither of Crouch transferring control of the transformative trick to the audience, nor of them co-ordinating their separate forms of engagement, but of each becoming “part and parcel of the system’s transformation of itself” (Ingold 345).

This is a demanding understanding of agency to become accustomed to and the script for *My Arm* was altered to better manage the demand. In his recent conversation with Catherine Love, Crouch claimed that he “lost his nerve” over the original opening during the Battersea Arts Centre previews, having been advised by his co-director Hettie Macdonald that images like the dog would “break the rules” before their establishment. One of Rebellato’s most suggestive observations about metaphors is that good ones “reward sustained attention”, making us “stretch

out” through a kind of mental gymnastics (26): flipping Sennett’s assertion that (sometimes wildly imaginative) metaphors can provide convenient ways of describing skilled practices (190-92), metaphors themselves both require and nurture skill. To appreciate all the interpretive possibilities that *My Arm* generates, audience members have to “stretch out” and relinquish their habit of looking for visual cues familiar from naturalism, but they relinquish it gradually. As ultimately performed, the play’s opening provides a transitional state in which the cues that audience members are expected to pick up on can still be traced to a single, albeit non-visual source: the words of the story being told. Watching the tentative “rules” being established is comparable to Sennett’s description of learning the violin through the Suzuki method: a delimited version of a complex technique only takes the initiate so far in becoming responsive, but it gives them immediate and “social confidence” from which to develop (155-56). Describing *My Arm* as the deliberately crafted work of certain artists using certain tools and skills to a certain purpose makes for an imperfect paraphrase, but still an adequate one. It gives the essential conditions that everyone in an audience should have come to recognise, in order to go on to describe their individual responses to others. If Crouch’s intuitive understanding of skilled practice is closer to Ingold’s, reframing it as a more determinable subject-centred and task-oriented one lets his audience acquire, and him refine, that intuition.

The Author: removing a model

Audiences at *My Arm* are reassured, before the storytelling begins, that any donated objects will “be treated with care” (*Plays* 24); despite Crouch’s appeals to the play’s transformative qualities, they are returned intact. Yet, in the 2003 edition’s introduction, he describes how “some audience members have felt

mildly affronted that [he] hadn't taken greater care of them" (*My Arm* 10). Paying attention to ideas of care can help to clarify the ethical claims that Sennett makes of skilled practice. Such practice is careful insofar as agency is transferred onto what is understood to be the object of a practice, through an intervention by its understood subject, with the trace of that intervention ultimately being erased. Good healthcare, for example, is a matter of providing appropriate support so that a patient can become self-sufficient again. The change made to *My Arm*'s script is an attempt to make the cared-for objects better proxies for a cared-for audience: the minimal force required to replace a condition in which the audience feel they cannot participate with one in which they can, from being its baffled objects to fully engaged subjects, was greater than Crouch had initially expected.

Ensuring that everyone involved in a performance feels cared for has remained important throughout Crouch's subsequent collaborations, but he has continued to be accused of not doing so. Despite insisting that the audience should be "beautifully lit and cared for" during *The Author* (2009) (164), the walk-outs and antagonistic responses for which it gained notoriety at the 2010 Edinburgh Festival is perhaps traceable to the lack of a clear minimal model, through which audiences could learn to respond to its hermeneutic challenge. Crouch sat among the audience along with three fellow performers: Vic Llewellyn, Esther Smith and initially Adrian Howells, later Chris Goode. They played characters with their own names, and recounted, with almost no visual illustration, experiences of performing or watching a graphically violent play written and directed by 'Tim Crouch'. This culminated with Crouch delivering an account, in fading-to-dim light, of watching child pornography in an infant's presence, and of killing himself upon being discov-

ered. The audience's constant sense of being wrong-footed by the play, summarised by Gareth White as being caught between either "allow[ing them]selves to imagine what is described, or actively attempt[ing] not to" (190), is made more uncomfortable because the play itself is so obviously crafted, and because the audience themselves are the objects of the crafting process. Helen Iball expresses her ongoing ethical uncertainty about the play by figuring performers or audience members as hosts for a parasite (438-39) and sacrificial victims (444), passive material worked on with destructive rather than minimum force. Indeed, in a reversal of *My Arm's* compositional history, Crouch ended the first draft of *The Author's* script with a model for the fixed structure of attention that the audience should have developed, only to remove it before public performance. After the death of 'Tim Crouch', and his departure from the auditorium, another planted actor would have been revealed: an elderly woman, compelled to "say something", "[n]ow that we're on our own". "say something, [n]ow that we're on our own". She would describe an article "about stories", read during her husband's diagnosis with a terminal disease.

It talked about the early days when the story-teller would stand behind the audience. The audience would face a wall or an empty space, and the story teller [sic] would stand behind them and tell the story without anyone looking at them. The audience would then see their own pictures, project their own vision of the story into thin air. This struck me. This gave me hope. ("Original ending" 244)

Had this ending survived into performance, it would have reassured audiences that *The Author* had been fostering within them the self-determination which is the goal of care: the parable de-

scribes what they would have been doing throughout the performance, projecting “pictures” as they listened with limited visual stimulus, acquiring a “hope”-ful capacity to reimagine the world, a capacity for which there is no clear model within the ‘realistically’ violent performance that *The Author* describes.

Cutting this ending is not an abdication of care, but testament to a rigorously ethical development in Crouch’s and his collaborators’ understanding of how to redistribute the capacity for skilled practice, not only between performers and audience, but also within the wider world on which *The Author* is so troublingly parasitic. The original parable of active spectatorship at the play’s end was an inadequate paraphrase in two crucial respects. Firstly, the audience have put their imagination to work on neither “an empty space”, nor the non-sentient objects of *My Arm*, but on each other, the performers and the shared space. Secondly, they are invited to demonstrate their attention by making public contributions, not merely listening and privately reflecting. By electing, with varying degrees of consciousness and spontaneity, to answer questions or pointedly refuse to do so, to react non-verbally or even to walk out, the audience are not only reshaping the material of the play but providing the material that others will reshape. By making fellow human beings the performance’s material, Crouch goes beyond *My Arm* in transferring not only his capacity to reshape material to the audience, but also a concomitant responsibility to treat that material well. Some will underestimate their agency and fail to apply necessary force to what they are witnessing: these are audience members who, for whatever reason, find descriptions of violence and abuse as upsetting as their graphic representation. Others will overestimate it and assert themselves too forcefully, such as those who become frustrated at the actors’ perceived failure to improvise in

response to their contributions (Bottoms, “A Conversation” 426-28). These deviations generate undeniable feelings of bitterness and regret, in both the audience and the performers, which justify Iball’s continued doubts about the play. But, by gradually developing a response to the play between these two extremes, audiences can come to recognise that they are not being passively “cared for”, but developing active structures of self-care and mutual care. Duška Radosavljević notes that plays like *The Author* guarantee safety for neither performers nor audiences, but with the important caveat (inherited from Bojana Cvejić) that what is unguaranteed is “safety [according] to a prior self-regulation” (189): safety must, like the wider structures of ethical and aesthetic judgement within which it belongs, be continually discovered within a process of skill.

Thus, until the moment that ‘Tim Crouch’ leaves the auditorium, the whole play should be seen as performing a comparable function to *My Arm*’s modified opening: its crafted structure distributes agency to the audience in a manner to which they can meaningfully respond. For as long as a character named Tim Crouch remains in the space, delivering lines known to be written by Crouch, he conspicuously initiates the distribution. This privilege must eventually be renounced: until he does so, Crouch the author is still comparable to the exploitative ‘Tim Crouch’ character, who allegedly passes “things for other people to solve” “over” to actors and audiences, but still expects credit for passing them (190). The conclusion to the first published version of the script marks this scaffolding’s removal, encouraging the audience now to shape their common experience in a manner unshaped by Crouch. “*There is no scripted ending*”: following initial prompts by the only remaining actor, the audience “*will deal with what’s left – in whichever way is felt*

appropriate”, ideally by continuing conversations here or elsewhere, and “*certainly [...] creating an imperfect act of love and hope*” (*The Author* 61). Given these detailed suggestions, and the continued reliance on the actor for support, this ending in effect remained “*scripted*”: ultimately the company found that these conditions constituted a “forced gesture of being ‘all in this together’” (Bottoms, “Materialising” 462), not an opportunity for self-determination. The 2011 edition abandons all text following Crouch’s exit except “*The houselights are on. The doors to the theatre are open.*” (203) The continued presence of the last actor and “the persistent absence of applause” (Bottoms, “Materialising” 463) offer an invitation to stay within the space, the lights and opening of the doors as clear an invitation to leave. Either action is acceptable and can constitute an “*appropriate*” response to the performance. As in certain Fluxist pieces, the most apparently passive theatrical gestures acquire “a quality of activity” (Morin 79).

Each of these three endings feels more “*imperfect*”, or less determined, than its predecessor, but only *feels* less determined because the opportunities to determine the experience have been more widely distributed, beyond the sphere of the individual subject. Audience members can only recognise this subtlety while the structures that generate shared experience and “social confidence” remain in force. As *The Author* finishes and the audience breaks up, this confidence will dissipate more and more, until the indeterminate quality of the remembered theatrical experience resembles the indeterminacy of the world outside. As long as a trace of such confidence survives, the network of self-determining but mutually dependent human agents that *The Author* has assembled can serve as a yet-to-be-perfected model for their social environment: *this* is the more complex

taskscape for which *The Author* trains its audience. Reconceiving Crouch's theatre of indeterminacy as one of fully distributed agency helps to explain what Morin sees as its "quasi-utopian" politics (80). Utopia will not be reached by skilful interventions in the political field from one individual or group, but at the moment at which all participants in that field have the opportunity to operate autonomously at once. This is the closest that Crouch can come to fulfilling Jacques Rancière's appeal for always-already emancipated spectators, who do not need "intricate dramaturgy" to be made more conspicuously active (Rancière 7).

This is a simultaneously dispiriting and comforting political affect: spontaneous unity of purpose and participation seems impossible, but also somehow embedded within existing practices, if they could only be spelt out more precisely. The doubleness is nicely captured by the two ways in which the same phrase is punctuated and contextualised in the co-written script of Crouch's and Smith's subsequent collaboration, *what happens to hope at the end of the evening* (2013). Having spent much of the piece celebrating the theatre as "a space where we can really be together" (2), Smith's persona, named in the script as Andy, announces that he "want[s] to start a revolution here". However, his model of revolution is figured, twice over, as reliant upon continuation in non-theatrical spaces by non-theatrical means: he describes a conversation in a bookshop about how the Living Theatre encouraged audiences to demand "Paradise Now!" in the streets (46). As the piece closes, Andy's friend, who is played by Crouch and takes over reading from Andy's script, concludes a final reflection on theatrical space by repeating "Paradise now." (63) Now punctuated to suggest a factual claim instead of a demand, the phrase gives the impression that change has already happened – and that any further change

cannot happen *without* this anticipatory sense of change being entirely prepared and determined.

Imagining writing

The kind of analysis that I have just conducted, of finding hermeneutic significance in a textual detail which may or may not be identifiable in performance, seems to justify Bottoms's proposal that "deft use of language [...] is one of the most vital, and under-appreciated, weapons in Crouch's armoury" ("Introduction", emphasis altered). Throughout this paper, however, I have attempted to argue that imagining Crouch as a careful user of resources does not do justice to a production process in which isolating deftness within one figure or skill can quickly become inaccurate and ethically troubling. (Perhaps Bottoms's metaphorical reaching for weapons should give us pause.) The very existence of a co-written script like *what happens...* reinforces the sense that Crouch is not the only writer within the rehearsal room, and it becomes hard to identify the boundary between writing and acts like directing, improvisational acting, negotiating props and opening doors. If I see these plays as working towards a condition in which indeterminacy becomes indistinguishable from a radically distributed understanding of determination, could I further extend the list of practices to include reading, and any list of collaborators to include all readers? This is to move away from figuring performance texts such as these as partial instructions for, or partial documentation of, events that lie essentially beyond the texts themselves. Instead, the text is figured as the site on which such practices occur, and becomes itself a layered history of those practices, to which any reading, editing or performing adds.

It is on these terms that the importance of writing as an underlying principle within Crouch's dramaturgy, and of the

scene of writing from *My Arm* with which I began, can be understood. Given that the gerund ‘writing’ unusually describes *both* the fixed, objectifiable product of a skilled process *and* the endless, intangible process itself, it can serve as a symbol of the condition in which the virtues of determination and indeterminacy can be felt simultaneously, even though this condition’s emergence is in practice dependent on a whole taskscape of interacting skills. Seeing a performer writing “*laboriously*” offers a curious counterpoint to the more familiar experience of reading a script and “imaginatively transform[ing] a purely literary text into a three-dimensional visual experience” (Rebellato 17): by staging the physical act of writing, the audience is implicitly invited to remember that this entire performance can itself be alternatively experienced as a text, and that this text’s composition was always-already an embodied, “laborious” performance. At the moment that this blurring takes place, theatre-making can be figured as “weaving” rather than “making” in Ingold’s terms: making the condition under which most products are understood to be made in Western modernity, ends by establishing a fixed “final form” such as a published script; in weaving, there is no break between process and product, with the process continuing “as long as life goes on – *punctuated* but not terminated by the appearance of the pieces that it successively brings into being” (347-48, emphasis unaltered). *My Arm*’s staged act of writing may appear to terminate, but “*this placard remains visible to the audience for the rest of the performance*” (*Plays* 36). The audience must bring themselves into the weaving process by continuing not only to read the words of the sign, but also to remember the labour with which it was produced. For Crouch and Ingold, this is an ethical injunction: “life” might just depend on it.

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